

15. THE RELATION BETWEEN OLD AND NEW COVENANT

Some Christians say that that the term covenant is hardly mentioned in the New Testament, and that therefore the notion has really become irrelevant for the New Testament church. They see the covenant as a physical arrangement that belonged with the Israel of old, but that has now, since the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, lost its importance. If it still functions, it does so only marginally. Some will cite numbers and percentages to prove that the covenant plays no great role in the New Testament.

They reason as follows. Under the old covenant, one was *born* into the covenant, and therefore immediately received the sign of that covenant in circumcision. It was a physical matter. But in the New Testament, we are told, things are different. To become part of God's people now, one needs to be *reborn*. Only then can one receive the sign. It is now a spiritual matter. It is not surprising that in this type of reasoning infant baptism cannot be maintained. I will come back to the issue of infant baptism in a later chapter. At this point I want to deal with the relation between the old and the new covenant.

It is important that we have a correct understanding of this relation. Can we still speak in covenantal terms when we seek to understand and apply the teaching of the New Testament in our lives? If so, how should this be done?

The New Testament: the promises fulfilled

We must begin by noting that in the New Testament the notion of a covenant is present from the very start, not as an after-thought or a side-line, but as an integral revelation of God. When we look at Matthew 1 we find the "genealogy of Jesus Christ" beginning with Abraham and going via David to Joseph. The birth of Christ is presented by Matthew as the fulfilment of the covenant promise made to Abraham and David.

Whenever a genealogy is given in the Bible, this has a special meaning. It is

meant to show that God works in the line of faithful covenant generations. The biblical view on history is not that we are caught in an endless, desperate circle, but that we are moving forward along the lines God has determined. God always progresses, and every generation may progress with him. So we all move forward until God's purpose has been fulfilled and his goal has been reached.

By his genealogy Matthew instantly makes clear that the birth of Jesus Christ is not a sudden, unrelated event in world history, but the result of ages of covenant history. Christ's birth was foretold and could therefore be anticipated. When Matthew describes the birth of our Lord, he refers to the prophecy of Isaiah: the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel – which means, God with us (1:22). It is remarkable how often Matthew uses the expression that something took place to fulfil the Old Testament. The new is clearly the fulfilment of the old. There is continuity and progression in the history of God's covenant.

In Luke 3 also we find a genealogy of the Lord Jesus, and here it goes back all the way to Adam. The specific covenant dealings with Israel begin with Abraham; Matthew's purpose is to convince Jews, and he therefore begins with Israel's father, Abraham. Luke's scope is wider and deeper. Writing to Theophilus, the Roman cosmopolitan, he explains that Christ's birth and ministry are to be linked with Adam, the first man. God's covenant work begins long before Israel was a nation. This underscores that Jesus is the Saviour of the world and of all mankind.

It is of interest to note that in the books of the Chronicles, which describe the history of Israel from the priestly viewpoint as that of God's holy nation, the starting point also is not with David, but with Adam (1 Chron 1:1). The Israelites knew that God's covenant with them and his demands upon them flowed forth from the same covenant that God made with man (Adam) in Paradise. We note the continuity. The genealogy shows the line of God's redemptive work: from Adam to Abraham, via David and Israel, to Jesus Christ! The New Testament does not inaugurate a radically different era. God does not work in an atomistic, fragmented manner. All of history is a unity. The New Testament proclaims already in its first pages that now in Christ the covenant lines of old are continued.

References to the Old Testament

I referred earlier to the song of Zechariah, who presents the events surrounding the birth of Jesus as a fulfilment of God's covenant promises: it was "to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham" (Luke 1:72).

The Gospel writers quote constantly from the Old Testament, for the ministry of the Lord Jesus cannot be understood except in that light. The Gospel was revealed in the Old Testament, when God made his covenant known, and it finds its continuation in the New Testament, when God confirms his covenant in the blood of his Son. The apostle Paul therefore writes of "the Gospel [God] promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his son" (Rom

1:2,3).

The apostles could not preach without referring to the Old Testament. Paul says to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch, “We tell you the good news [the Gospel]: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus” (Acts 13:32). In this same chapter there are several references to the Old Testament. It is clear: the Gospel of our salvation is the fulfilment of the covenant promises given to the fathers under the old dispensation.

We already noted the passage in Luke 24, where the Lord Jesus mentioned to his disciples how Moses, the prophets and the Psalms (the whole Old Testament) refer to his suffering, death, and glory. He said the same to the Jewish leaders: “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39).

While the Old Testament makes known to us the promise(s) of the covenant, the New Testament makes known to us the fulfillment of these promises in Christ Jesus. In the early church all this was already known and accepted. Augustine wrote, “*Vetus testamentum in novo patet, novum in vetere latet*”, which means, The Old Testament becomes clear in the New, the New is hidden (latent) in the Old.

The foregoing does not mean that all God’s promises given in the Old Testament have already been fulfilled in the New. We still await the return of Christ and the perfection of all things. We can also think of the promise given in Isaiah 11:6ff. about the peace and harmony that will prevail on the new earth. Much progress has been made on the path of salvation, but the promises concerning the final restoration of all things still await their fulfillment.

Old and New: a matter of less and more

Not only may we think in terms of promise and fulfillment when speaking of the relation between Old and New Testament, we may also speak in terms of “less” and “more.” While God’s people under the old covenant were richly blessed, this is even more so the case with God’s people under the new covenant.

There are a number of Scripture passages which confirm this. I think of 2 Corinthians 3:7-18, where the apostle compares the glory of the new covenant to that of the old.

Paul introduces the topic by explaining (3:6) that God has made him and his fellow-workers competent as “ministers of a new covenant.” What is this new covenant? It is a covenant not of the letter but of the Spirit. This means, in accordance with Jeremiah 31, that the new covenant has as its main feature the inscribing of God’s law *on our hearts* by the Holy Spirit. We are to serve God and love our neighbour from the heart as reborn people.

Was this not the demand also of the old covenant? Yes, it was, but this demand could not be fulfilled because of man’s sinfulness. The law which was intended to bring life brought only death and condemnation. Paul emphasizes this for the benefit of the Judaizers (with whom he often had to deal) because they taught that

life could be attained by the keeping of the law. But we cannot keep it. Paul therefore writes of “the letter which kills” (2 Cor 3:6). But the Spirit, he adds, gives life; that is, the Spirit writes God’s law on our hearts and enables us to live as God’s children. We have truly made progress.

Was the Spirit then not active before? Certainly, he was. We will pay attention to this also. But it is in the new covenant that the Spirit fully applies the redeeming work of Christ and leads people by faith in Christ to serve God with mind and heart.

Notice that Paul does not discount the old covenant as if it were nothing. He writes about the glory of the old covenant, which was evident in the fact that the Israelites could not look upon Moses’ face because it shone with the glory of God himself. God was at that time also in the midst of his people and showed his glory among them. He then also saved his people.

But now comes the point of comparison: if that old covenant which condemned men and had to fade away, had such glory, how much more glorious is the new covenant! The glory of the new surpasses that of the old, because it is the fulfillment of the old and finds its focus in the perfect ministry of Christ.

If only the Jews of Paul’s time had understood this. Then they would also have much more clearly understood the Old Testament. But just as Moses put a veil over his face to hide the radiant glory of God, so the hearts of the Jews were veiled (2 Cor 3:15). The glory of the Old Testament is seen only through Christ Jesus.

Old and New: from shadows to realities

The letter to the Hebrews compares the old and the new covenant in a similar manner as 2 Corinthians 3. It does not say that the old covenant was without benefit, for it served its purpose. Through the Levitical priesthood atonement was made for sin (Heb 5:1-4). But it did not bring about a lasting reconciliation.

In Hebrews 10:1 we read that “the law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves.” The falling of a shadow is an indication that something or some one is *coming*. In that sense the old covenant was a sure and firm token. But it did not bring the real thing. It was not meant to do so: the real thing would come only through Jesus Christ.

In what way is the new then superior to the old? We have in Christ a perfect high priest who was tempted just as we are – and thus can understand our predicament – but who is without sin (Heb 4:4-16). This high priest does not serve for a time, to be removed by age or death, but is an eternal high priest after the order of Melchizedek. The LORD swore that Jesus would be a priest forever (Ps 110), and this makes him “the guarantee of a better covenant” (Heb 7:22). Other priests offered the blood of animals, but Christ offered his own blood in one single sacrifice (Heb 9:28; 10:12). Therefore “Christ is the mediator of a better covenant” (Heb 9:15). The inheritance of God’s children is now more secure than it ever was

before. I think here also of Romans 8:34, where we are assured that Christ, who died for us and has been raised to life, “is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”

The old covenant functioned for a time, but it never made a decisive breakthrough. Therefore it became obsolete. The old covenant was good, but the new covenant is better. Since we have now a better covenant, we have all the more reason to be faithful to God. The warnings and sanctions of the new covenant are more severe than those of the old. If God punished sin under the old covenant, he will certainly do so under the new!

Therefore the admonitions in the letter to the Hebrews are worded strongly. We must struggle against sin to the point of “shedding our blood.” We shall not be covenant breakers like Esau (Heb 12:16). If ever, now is the time for thankful service. “How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation”? (Heb 2:3). We are reminded that our God is a “consuming fire” (Heb 12:29). Note particularly the admonition of Hebrews 10:28 and 29: “Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?”

If the old covenant could not be taken lightly, the new covenant is an even more serious matter. We no longer live in the shadows but stand in the full light of God’s grace in Christ. Where this grace is spurned, there is no way of salvation left open. In this way we begin to understand the seriousness of sin against the Holy Spirit (Matt 12:32; Heb 6:4-6; 1 John 5:16).